

AN INTERVIEW WITH DOROTHY NICHOLS:

A CONTRIBUTION TO A SURVEY OF LIFE AND STRUCTURES ON THE COMSTOCK

Interviewee: Dorothy Nichols

Interviewed: 1984

Published: 1984

Interviewer: Ann Harvey

UNOHP Catalog #125

Description

Dorothy Ruth Young Nichols was born in Gold Hill, Nevada, on July 26, 1903, into a family that was "already third generation Virginia City." She spent her childhood on the Comstock and describes in her oral history how she attended the Fourth Ward School and the social activities of young people on the Comstock. She also describes her father's occupation as a mine hoist engineer and the economic changes that have affected Comstock mining and society.

Although she left Virginia City after her sophomore year in high school, Mrs. Nichols's interest in the community in which she was raised has not waned. She is the author of *Virginia City . . . in My Day*, a work that is one of the few sources available to historians about the Comstock after the great Bonanza.

On the occasion of her seventieth birthday, Mrs. Nichols recorded some of her thoughts about her life:

Every age has its compensation. I am facing my old age with zest and a joy of living; it is great to be so physically well and feel secure. In earlier days there were too many problems and too little money—too much anxiety climbing to the top. All this is over; I have written a successful memory album of my home town and now feel fulfilled. At seventy I look forward to more delightful years.

Dorothy Nichols is now eighty-one years old, but she still feels that these words represent her thoughts, reflecting the spirit of a woman raised on the Comstock. In many ways, they reflect the spirit of the community itself.

AN INTERVIEW WITH DOROTHY NICHOLS

**AN INTERVIEW WITH DOROTHY NICHOLS:
A CONTRIBUTION TO A SURVEY OF
LIFE AND STRUCTURES ON THE COMSTOCK**

PREPARED FOR THE STOREY COUNTY, NEVADA
BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS

MAJOR FUNDING BY THE DEPARTMENT OF INTERIOR,
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE AND THE STATE OF NEVADA,
DIVISION OF HISTORIC PRESERVATION AND ARCHEOLOGY

An Oral History Conducted by Ann Harvey
July 10, 1984

University of Nevada Oral History Program

Copyright 1984
University of Nevada Oral History Program
Mail Stop 0324
Reno, Nevada 89557
unohp@unr.edu
<http://www.unr.edu/oralhistory>

All rights reserved. Published 1984.
Printed in the United States of America

Publication Staff:
Director: R.T. King

University of Nevada Oral History Program Use Policy

All UNOHP interviews are copyrighted materials. They may be downloaded and/or printed for personal reference and educational use, but not republished or sold. Under “fair use” standards, excerpts of up to 1000 words may be quoted for publication without UNOHP permission as long as the use is non-commercial and materials are properly cited. The citation should include the title of the work, the name of the person or people interviewed, the date of publication or production, and the fact that the work was published or produced by the University of Nevada Oral History Program (and collaborating institutions, when applicable). Requests for permission to quote for other publication, or to use any photos found within the transcripts, should be addressed to the UNOHP, Mail Stop 0324, University of Nevada, Reno, Reno, NV 89557-0324. Original recordings of most UNOHP interviews are available for research purposes upon request.

CONTENTS

| | |
|------------------------------------|------|
| Preface to the Digital Edition | ix |
| Original Preface | xi |
| Introduction | xiii |
| An Interview with Dorothy Nichols | 1 |
| Photographs | 11 |
| Original Index: For Reference Only | 15 |

PREFACE TO THE DIGITAL EDITION

Established in 1964, the University of Nevada Oral History Program (UNOHP) explores the remembered past through rigorous oral history interviewing, creating a record for present and future researchers. The program's collection of primary source oral histories is an important body of information about significant events, people, places, and activities in twentieth and twenty-first century Nevada and the West.

The UNOHP wishes to make the information in its oral histories accessible to a broad range of patrons. To achieve this goal, its transcripts must speak with an intelligible voice. However, no type font contains symbols for physical gestures and vocal modulations which are integral parts of verbal communication. When human speech is represented in print, stripped of these signals, the result can be a morass of seemingly tangled syntax and incomplete sentences—totally verbatim transcripts sometimes verge on incoherence. Therefore, this transcript has been lightly edited.

While taking great pains not to alter meaning in any way, the editor may have removed false starts, redundancies, and the “uhs,” “ahs,” and other noises with which speech is often liberally sprinkled; compressed some passages which, in unaltered form, misrepresent the chronicler’s meaning; and relocated some material to place information in its intended context. Laughter is represented with [laughter] at the end of a sentence in which it occurs, and ellipses are used to indicate that a statement has been interrupted or is incomplete...or that there is a pause for dramatic effect.

As with all of our oral histories, while we can vouch for the authenticity of the interviews in the UNOHP collection, we advise readers to keep in mind that these are remembered pasts, and we do not claim that the recollections are entirely free of error. We can state, however, that the transcripts accurately reflect the oral history recordings on which they were based. Accordingly, each transcript should be approached with the

same prudence that the intelligent reader exercises when consulting government records, newspaper accounts, diaries, and other sources of historical information. All statements made here constitute the remembrance or opinions of the individuals who were interviewed, and not the opinions of the UNOHP.

In order to standardize the design of all UNOHP transcripts for the online database, most have been reformatted, a process that was completed in 2012. This document may therefore differ in appearance and pagination from earlier printed versions. Rather than compile entirely new indexes for each volume, the UNOHP has made each transcript fully searchable electronically. If a previous version of this volume existed, its original index has been appended to this document for reference only. A link to the entire catalog can be found online at <http://oralhistory.unr.edu/>.

For more information on the UNOHP or any of its publications, please contact the University of Nevada Oral History Program at Mail Stop 0324, University of Nevada, Reno, NV, 89557-0324 or by calling 775/784-6932.

Alicia Barber
Director, UNOHP
July 2012

ORIGINAL PREFACE

The University of Nevada Oral History Program (OHP) engages in systematic interviewing of persons who can provide firsthand descriptions of events, people and places that give history its substance. The products of this research are the tapes of the interviews and their transcriptions.

In themselves, oral history interviews are not history. However, they often contain valuable primary source material, as useful in the process of historiographical synthesization as the written sources to which historians have customarily turned. Verifying the accuracy of all of the statements made in the course of an interview would require more time and money than the OHP's operating budget permits. The program can vouch that the statements were made, but it cannot attest that they are free of error. Accordingly, oral histories should be read with the same prudence that the reader exercises when consulting government records, newspaper accounts, diaries and other sources of historical information.

It is the policy of the OHP to produce transcripts that are as close to verbatim

as possible, but some alteration of the text is generally both unavoidable and desirable. When human speech is captured in print the result can be a morass of tangled syntax, false starts and incomplete sentences, sometimes verging on incoherency. The type font contains no symbols for the physical gestures and the diverse vocal modulations that are integral parts of communication through speech. Experience shows that totally verbatim transcripts are often totally unreadable and therefore a total waste of the resources expended in their production. While keeping alterations to a minimum the OHP will, in preparing a text:

- a. generally delete false starts, redundancies and the uhs, ahs and other noises with which speech is often liberally sprinkled;
- b. occasionally compress language that would be confusing to the reader in unaltered form;
- c. rarely shift a portion of a transcript to place it in its proper context; and
- d. enclose in [brackets] explanatory information or words that were not uttered

but have been added to render the text intelligible.

There will be readers who prefer to take their oral history straight, without even the minimal editing that occurred in the production of this text; they are directed to the tape recording.

Copies of all or part of this work and the tape recording from which it is derived are available from:

The University of Nevada
Oral History Program
Mailstop 0324
University of Nevada, Reno 89557
(775) 784-6932

INTRODUCTION

Dorothy Ruth Young Nichols was born in Gold Hill, Nevada, 26 July 1903 into a family that was, as she proudly affirms, "already third generation Virginia City." Mrs. Nichols spent her childhood on the Comstock and includes in her oral history memories of attending the Fourth ward School and the social activities of young people on the Comstock. Particularly interesting are descriptions of her father's occupation as mine hoist engineer and also of the economic changes that have affected Comstock mining and society.

Although she left Virginia City after her sophomore year in high school, Dorothy Nichol's interest in the community in which she was raised has not waned. She is the author of *Virginia City...in My Day*, a work that is now in its second edition and is one of the few sources available to historians on the Comstock after the day of the great bonanza. On the occasion of her seventieth birthday Mrs. Nichols recorded some of her thoughts about her life; these reflections constitute an excellent introduction to her oral history:

Every age has its compensation. I am facing my old age with zest and a joy of living; it is great to be so physically well and feel secure. In earlier days there were too many problems and too little money—too much anxiety climbing to the top. All this is over; I have written a successful memory album of my home town and now I feel fulfilled. At seventy I look forward to more delightful years.

Dorothy Nichols is now 81 years old, but she still feels that these words represent her thoughts, reflecting the spirit of a woman raised on the Comstock. In many ways, they may reflect the spirit of the community itself.



DOROTHY NICHOLS
1984

AN INTERVIEW WITH DOROTHY NICHOLS

Dorothy Young Nichols: I was born in Gold Hill in 1903 to a family that was already third generation in Virginia City. I grew up at a time [when] many buildings were being demolished or [were] vacant. But Virginia City and Gold Hill were still busy mining towns—busy and hopeful in that special, early 1900 way.

I had 2 brothers and a sister [and my parents were] Charles and Rilla Young. I went to the Fourth Ward School through the sophomore year.

Ann Harvey: Was the Fourth Ward School at that time a high school and grammar school combined?

Yes.

After you finished your sophomore year at Virginia City, what did you do?

I went to the Gallagher Marsh Business School in Oakland, and then I went to work at the California Cotton Mills. I was a stenographer there.

I married Harry Westphal in October, 1922. We had 2 children—Harry, Jr., who was born in November, 1923, and Fred, born in April, 1925.

After you got married did you work at home as a housewife?

Yes. My husband passed away when he was 33, and I had the children to care for. I came to Placerville [California] in 1934, where I married Raymond Nichols, and we went into the fuel oil business. And the boys helped—they were young, but they helped a great deal. I took care of the office, and my husband did the other—delivering, and that part of the business.

Would you like to tell us something about the history of your family in Virginia City?

Yes. The stories of the great bonanza were part of my childhood, and photographs were kept of those earlier times to remind us of the importance our town had once attained. It is

heartening in the midst of obvious decline to know how glorious the past had been. So the tales were told and the pictures were treasured and became interwoven with my memories of the now—of the first 3 decades of the 1900s. These memories, too, are being clouded by the years, names and places forgotten or confused with others or disappearing entirely, as the buildings themselves and the people who used them vanish into history.

My great-grandfather and great-grandmother, John and Jane Rasner, and several of their children left Clay County, Kentucky, in 1860, joining a wagon train and taking a year to reach Gold Hill, Nevada, where the big mining boom was on. Some of the children may have died on the journey, as I only knew of 2 sisters and 2 brothers of my grandmother's.

My grandmother, Eliza Ann Rasner, was 8 years old when they left Kentucky. John Rasner died in 1862 at age 49. The long journey was evidently too arduous for him, as he didn't arrive in Gold Hill until 1861. He and his wife, Jane, are buried in the Gold Hill cemetery.

Grandma's sister, Catherine, married Solomon Noel. They were the parents of George Noel, district attorney of Storey County in about 1914. Catherine died in 1898. Grandma's sister, Ellen, married C. C. Butler. And there were 2 brothers—George and Joseph Rasner.

My grandfather, Willet Young, left the East Coast and came west by way of the Isthmus of Panama. Arriving in San Francisco, he enrolled in Santa Clara College and studied medicine or pharmacy. He was there from 1856 to 1858. He arrived in Gold Hill in 1872 and worked for J. Jones Pharmacy in the building next to the Maynard building in Gold Hill.

About 1874 he married Eliza Ann Rasner. They lived in Gold Hill where their son,

Charles Willet, was born July 1, 1876. Charles attended school in Gold Hill for a time, but his father traveled to Idaho to start a drugstore in Bellevue, Idaho, so Charles continued his education there. Willet returned to Virginia City, where he worked for A. M. Cole Pharmacy. At this time they bought their home on the Divide, which is the district between Gold Hill and Virginia City.

In February, 1908, Eliza's sister and brother-in-law came down with pneumonia. Eliza cared for them until their deaths within a very short time. With grief and so much sickness, Eliza contracted the same disease and died on February 23, 1908. Within 3 weeks all 3 were laid to rest. Willet then left Virginia City for Elko, where he died in 1915.

On the maternal side of my family my great-grandfather, Robert Cochran, and great-grandmother, Mary Williamson Cochran, lived in Sacramento where their children were born. Mary was born in 1853 and William in 1863. They arrived in Virginia City early in 1864. Robert opened a tin shop or sheet metal shop at 78 South C Street, but soon moved to 93 South C Street. They took out a homestead on the property at this address, their home being upstairs over the shop. This transaction was recorded on May 22, 1877.

Upon Robert's death, my grandfather, William, took over the business and operated it until the decline in mining in the early 1900s. William married Minnie Ellen Brown about 1883; they had 4 children, my mother being the eldest.

What did your grandfather do after the decline in the mining industry of the early 1900s?

He worked in another shop, and then they moved to Sacramento for a time.

My mother's grandfather, James Brown, arrived in New York from England in the early 1860s. His wife, Jane Parks Brown, followed. They stayed in New York for a time and arrived in San Francisco in 1868 or 1869. They went first to Silver City and then to Gold Hill where James Brown was a machinist at one of the mines. [Machinists] repaired the machinery and at times had to make parts for the hoist and other machinery. James left for a machinist job in Park City, Utah, where he died at age 44. Jane Brown lived in Virginia City until her death in 1903.

Minnie Ellen Brown was born in New York to James and Jane Parks Brown in 1865. They came to Nevada when Minnie was a child; she attended school in Gold Hill. After the death of her father, she moved to Virginia City and did sewing for others. In 1883 she married William Cochran while he was in the metal trade.

My grandparents lived on Howard Street above A Street in a very comfortable home for its day, although we had to bring in a long metal tub, no doubt made by my grandfather in his shop, and put it in front of the kitchen stove in order to have a bath. A trip to the outhouse was anything but pleasant during the heavy snows of that time.

How far away were the outhouses from the home?

Oh, not too far! Within walking distance.
[laughter]

They lived there the greater part of their lives. William passed away in February, 1923, and Minnie in Reno in 1945.

Now to my parents. Charles Willet Young was born in Gold Hill July 1, 1876, to Willet and Eliza Young and lived there until his father moved to Idaho. Upon their return to Virginia City Willet bought a home at Sheldon

and E streets on the Divide. Charles worked at the mills and mines, being hoist engineer for many years of the Yellow Jacket in Gold Hill.

Could you tell me what a hoist engineer does in one of the mines?

They lower the cage for the men to go down to the different levels. And they bring them up for their lunch hour and such as that. And then they have the change room there where they shower and change. But during any time of an accident, they have to be very careful of the gas that accumulates down there. They send canaries down in cages to test the air. And that's another job for the hoist engineer—running the hoist up and down through the shaft after a fire or [when] the gases are bad, [with] a canary to check the air.

Could anyone become a hoist engineer in a mine?

No, you have to take an examination for it. You have to go to the state and [take] your examination, get your license. My dad was hoist engineer for over 20 years and never had one accident of any kind. It was a very good record for the mining company at that time. That was one thing he was quite proud of.

Did your father do anything else besides being a hoist engineer in the mines?

Yes, he was shift boss. They had 3 shifts a day that they were running. There was the morning shift [7:00 in the morning to 3:00], the afternoon [3:00 to 11:00], and the graveyard [11:00 to 7:00]. They ran for 2 weeks; the only day he ever had off was the change...he called it the "long change." When he'd come home from the graveyard [shift],

he wouldn't have to go back to work until the following Monday, like, on a Sunday off. That was the only time he *ever* had a day off. They worked 30 days a month.

Was the shift boss responsible for the men on his shift?

Yes, he was. He had to be sure that the right number went down and came up again. They also had to take care of the candles and lanterns until later on when they had lights. But they had candles down there, and they had to go back into the drifts [horizontal tunnels in a mine] and such as that to drill these big holes and put the dynamite in. It was very, very hazardous.

And the shift boss saw over all of that?

Yes. He was shift boss for probably 4 or 5 years, and then he went to be hoist engineer.

Did you ever help your father when he worked in the mines?

Well, when my father had to work nights very often I would go down and pick up his pay—[the] most that he ever made was \$150 a month, paid in gold coins. I'd stop at the office in the building where the art school is now, get his pay, and bring it up in a little envelope with gold pieces in [it]. If I only had a few! [laughter]

The pay master would give the pay to a little girl?

Yes. Well, we knew them all in a small town; we knew everyone.

Did you ever do anything else to help your dad when he was in the mines?

Well, sometimes I would take his lunch. If Mother didn't have the pasties [individual meat pies traditional to Cornish miners] already made or something like that, I'd take his lunch down about 6:00 in the afternoon. I used to love to go into the hoist room. It always smelled of tar, but I used to like to sit there with my dad. And he'd bring the men up from one level to the other level. Every time it rang 2 bells, up he'd come. I really enjoyed that; I'd go down there maybe once a week.

What did your father do after working in the mines?

After mining declined he served as chief of police in Virginia City, and also served a term as assemblyman from Storey County.

As police chief in Virginia City, did he ever tell you of any of his experiences?

Well, I wasn't with him when he was the chief of police, but I know he enjoyed his work. And he had to stay at the firehouse, which he didn't appreciate too much, but he stayed at the firehouse nights. But he enjoyed his work always. [laughter]

Did he enjoy being an assemblyman from Storey County?

Yes, I'm sure he did.

What can you tell us about your mother?

My mother, Rilla Cochran Young, was born in Virginia City to William and Minnie Cochran on June 12, 1884. she attended Fourth Ward School. In 1902 she and Charles W. Young were married and were the parents of Dorothy, Bud, Clarice and Fred Young. Mother was very active in the PTA, serving as

president. [She was] also in the Eastern Star and in St. Paul's Guild of the Episcopal church.

After the death of Eliza Young in 1908, the family moved to Eliza's home, which was our well-loved, happy home until the dreadful fire of November 13, 1942, which took the entire Divide. Twenty-four homes were burned that night, leaving many people homeless. The Divide firehouse and other historical structures were destroyed. Everything was leveled from the top of Gold Hill grade to within a short distance of the Chollar mine. All records and cherished possessions of my parents were destroyed. It was such a blow to them, they never fully recovered this great loss. They lived in Virginia City all of their lives; Mother passed away in 1954 and Dad in May, 1959.

Before we go on, Mrs. Nichols, could you describe to me some of the work activities your mother engaged in while you were growing up?

Monday seemed to be the big day; it was wash day. [laughter] She was up real early in the morning putting the wash boiler on to have hot water. She'd boil some of the clothes, and then she'd get out the 2 tubs—the wash tub and the blueing tub. She'd be washing clothes from the time I went to school at 8:30, and when I'd come home at noon she was still washing; it was quite a job keeping 4 children in clean clothes. They worked very, very hard in those days, extremely hard. That would be Monday.

Tuesday would be ironing with those heavy irons. [laughter] Then Wednesday was probably baking; I don't recall, [but] she baked all the bread. I know on Saturdays we had to wash the napkins and iron them—we never had paper napkins or such as that. We had clean napkins on Wednesday and Saturday. Then on Saturday we usually cleaned the silver

and cleaned the drawers that [the silver] was in. That was my job, usually, on Saturday.

So you helped your mom around the house on Saturdays?

Yes, and cleaned my bedroom. [We] had to keep [our rooms] clean in those days; kids don't today! [laughter]

Now, when you were a child growing up in the Virginia City and Gold Hill area, what did you do for fun when you weren't going to school?

We had to make all of our own enjoyment. We'd play hide and seek, kick the can and do a few mischievous things, such as going up to the firehouse—we didn't have a telephone, but there was one at the firehouse—and we'd go up and call the grocer, and ask him if he had Prince Albert in a can, to let him out and such as that. [laughter]

Also we had a dear, dear phone operator. Every time you'd call, she'd say, "Hallo, hallo."

So we'd call her and say, "How's your head, Anna?"

She'd say, "Hallo." Then we'd hang up.

Who were the children you played with? Do you remember their names?

Oh yes, all of them. Marjorie and Myra Higgins, Ruth George, Belle Ward [and] Miriam Kline. That's [their] names, you know, before they were married.

When I was going to school our Divide had beautiful homes on it. There were so many nice homes; it was really populated up there. But from about 1915 to 1922 or 1923, one by one they were torn down. You could buy them for taxes, and they were torn down and used for firewood. We would get some nice things out of those homes. I had a playhouse

my dad built from some of the lumber, and I had a beautiful what-not, that if I had today I would love. But we just broke them up.

Why were the homes so inexpensive?

Everyone was gone. People were gone, mining declined, there weren't jobs. And there were several [deserted houses] on the Divide...everywhere; not just the Divide. Up on A Street where my grandmother lived there were houses torn down there.

During the winter what did the children on the Divide do? Did they ice skate?

Oh, yes indeed. That was a great time. After they cut 2 crops of ice for the icehouse, we were allowed to skate. But cutting the ice was really an experience. First they had a horse go on there with a marker that would score the ice on the big reservoir on the Divide. And this horse would take the scorer, and they'd go and they'd mark it. Then they would saw it. The men would saw all this ice, and it would be 12 inches thick. They would push it to the side, and [then] my brother and John Higgins and these young fellows would go there with pikes—pikes were long thin poles with a hook on the end. They would use the pikes to get [the ice] into the chute, and chute it down into the icehouse. [In the icehouse] there'd be a layer of ice and [a] layer of sawdust and a layer of ice; they'd have enough for 2 years.

What was the ice used for?

For the mines. The miners had to have ice all the time, because where they worked the heat was almost best." So you'd choose someone out of there, and if it was a boy, you'd be teased about it. [laughter]

Most children love a parade. Were there ever parades in Virginia City?

Oh! The parade that I remember most was [in] 1912. Bunny Nulty was the queen and her escort was John McGrath, whom she eventually married. My uncle was the gentleman-in-waiting. They had beautiful floats, and the whole town was hung in bunting and flags. They would have [a] night parade on the night before the Fourth or Labor Day, and then [there would be another] the next day.

What was the route these parades used to take in Virginia City?

[Reading from the 1903 *Comstock Carnival* parade program:] "The line will be formed at 10:30 sharp. The procession will move at 11:00. The column will be moved through C Street to Carson Street to B Street, south on B to the junction of C, north on C to Carson Street to B, along B to a point north of the Opera House, where the procession will b~ reviewed by the grand marshal and dismissed."

What else did the children do in Virginia City for fun in the summer?

Well, we used to go up on the flume quite a bit; and sometimes we went clear to the top of Mount Davidson with a can of beans and a box of crackers. We used to enjoy that so much. Then we had our school picnic at Bowers Mansion. We'd get on the old V & T [Virginia & Truckee] train and ride to Bowers Mansion. Then we'd have our picnic, and there'd be the warm water pool and the cool water pool. We always had such a good time. And sometimes on Fourth of July the parents would go; we'd all go. That was one

of the highlights of our life, going to Bowers Mansion.

We've been talking about what you did to entertain yourself as a child. But you were growing up all of this time in Virginia City, and I wonder what you started to do once you became a teenager in Virginia City?

Well, there wasn't too much entertainment at that time—no radios...we had a Morning Glory phonograph—but that was about all. But we would go to the shows. Piper's Opera House would have *John Bunny*, and I believe they were showing *The Perils of Pauline* at the National Guard Hall. They showed movies at both places. Saturday night at the Opera House, we'd sit up in the gallery and see all of the movies.

That was what we did until we got in high school, and we would go to the dances [at the National Guard Hall]. Now, Saint Patrick's [Day we] always had a big dance and a fish pond for the kids.* We always had a great time at the Saint Patrick's party.

Who gave the Saint Patrick's party?

The Saint Patrick's Altar Society from the Catholic church put that on. It was a fund raiser for them and something we all looked forward to—that and the graduations that took place. And there was always a beautiful dance at New Year's. That was what we did. Then, after Prohibition came in, we were allowed to go into the Crystal Bar and have a milkshake, which made us feel *real* grown up!

When you went to dances at the National Guard Hall did you go with girls, or did you go with a boy, or did you go chaperoned?

I always went with my neighbor, Mrs. Clark. She loved to go, and she would take

me. She'd sit up in the gallery a good part of the time, but I always went with her.

So there was a gallery where the adults could watch the children dance?

Yes.

About what age were you when you went to the dances?

Oh, 15.

And shortly thereafter you left Virginia City, didn't you?

Yes, I did. I left at 16 and went to Gallagher Marsh Business College. After that I went to work as a stenographer at the California Cotton Mills.

Why did you decide to become a stenographer? In those days most women worked at home, didn't they?

Well, there were quite a few [women] leaving school at that time. My aunt, Marguerite, from Virginia City went down to Oakland, went to business college and came home with a very good job. So after vacation, I went back with her.

And you studied at the stenographical school, became a stenographer and got a job?

*The “fish ponds” that Dorothy Nichols is referring to are carnival-type booths. The customer throws a fishing line into an enclosed area, and a person hidden in the booth connects a prize to the line. The customer then reels in his prize.

Yes.

When did you go back to Virginia City, Mrs. Nichols?

After I married I would go up there every year for 2 weeks, and then I spent every other Christmas there for years. Then, after I moved to Placerville, it was so close I spent quite a bit of time in Virginia City.

What was going on in Virginia City when you'd go back in the 1930s?

It was going downhill fast, and so many buildings were disappearing. The National Guard Hall fell in in 1940. That was a beautiful, big building—it's where the stock exchange was at one time. And the Wells Fargo building, the original one, it fell in.

Did it fall in in the 1930s?

Well, probably in the 1930s because there was the old Occidental Hotel there, and I think it went down the end of the 1930s or the early 1940s. It was boarded up for years; I never remember seeing it open.

Were there other buildings that you started to notice were missing when you went back on your trips?

Yes. There was George Wilson's—it was the old N. C. Prater, really. They moved from the upper part of C Street down to the middle of town. That was a grocery store. It was one of many grocery stores in the old days. Even in my time, there were at least 6 grocery stores—2 on the Divide, Ed Lynd's and Pasco's. But they all disappeared. Then the fire in 1942 really cleaned up the Divide. It was a very sad affair. So many people lost their homes.

Does anyone know how that got started?

It was supposed to have been a brush fire that came up from Gold Hill and came right up to the top [of the Divide]. The wind was so very strong up there—it is today—very strong on the Divide. It was quite a disaster—no one even saved a handkerchief.

How many buildings did you say were destroyed on the Divide during this fire?

Well, they've always said 27, but I read an account the other day that said 24, 50 it was somewhere around there.

Virginia City suffered another tragedy along with the rest of the country in the 1940s with the war, didn't it, Mrs. Nichols?

Yes. The 1940s and World War II were bleak days for the Comstock. Buildings were vacant and collapsing for lack of repairs; and with the war and rationing of gasoline and tires, there was no traveling or mining, due to wartime restrictions. The Fourth Ward School was in sad shape and [there was] no money for repairs. Our historic town was fast becoming a ghost town.

In 1951 came Lucius Beebe, who bought the *Territorial Enterprise*. The paper had not been printed since 1916, although Lyman Clark of the *Evening Chronicle* held out until 1927. When Lucius Beebe and Charles Clegg revived the *Enterprise* with Clegg as editor and photographer and Beebe as publisher, the paper was a success from the start. With their different way of handling the news and editorials and with many noted and wealthy advertisers to add interest, there were subscribers in every state in the Union. Widespread acclaim greeted the revival of the *Enterprise*.

Virginia City again had a literary colony as well as gourmet gatherings at the Delta, Sharon House and Beebe home. His friends, Helen and Phillip Brown, published a city cookbook with special recipes of local cooks, such as Queenie's Raviolis. Katherine Best and Katherine Hillyer were authors of note, as well as Walter Van Tilburg Clark and Roger Butterfield.

Beebe and Clegg not only published the *Enterprise* but bought and restored the Piper house, making it into a mansion, complete with a private swimming pool—the first for Virginia City. Beebe also had his own barber shop where the town barber, Louis Avansino, called each day to shave and trim his hair. In the barber shop for his own enjoyment he had a slot machine. I often wonder if he ever hit the jackpot.

The *Enterprise* brought tourism to the Comstock. New stores were opened—souvenir shops, such as the Totem Pole started by Roy Shetler who was known as Buffalo Bill. He did very well in his shop, so other souvenir shops opened. The Delta enlarged and put in a gift shop. The Pioneer Drugstore was sold, and the new owners put in a movie depicting the early days of the Comstock, which made a hit with the tourists. Business was picking up, and real estate prices doubled and tripled overnight.

Then "Bonanza" came, the TV show at the Ponderosa Ranch that became a hit.

About what time was that? Do you remember?

Nineteen sixties. It became a hit, and it must have been in the 1960s. The Cartwrights, having Lorne Greene, Michael Landon, [Dan Blocker] and [Pernell Roberts] in leading parts, was on the air for years and a favorite of the entire family. It brought many tourists into Virginia City to see where it all took place.

After finding the bad guys, straightening out the bank, visiting the doctor, and doing all the shopping in Virginia City, it was a disappointment to the fans to find out that it was filmed at the Ponderosa Ranch at Lake Tahoe.

You were working at the visitors center up there. Is some of this from your own experience?

Yes, indeed. I went to work there in 1971, and I was there for a few years—and this Ponderosa affair was all through my own experience. [The tourists] would come in looking for the bank or where they had to do all of their good shopping, and find out they had to go back to Lake Tahoe to find it!

Virginia City now has its "new bonanza" with a color and charm distinctly its own prosperity at every corner; all buildings occupied by either a bar, candy shop, souvenir shop and even a mall. "The Way It Was" Museum on North C Street has a video giving history of the town, also marvelous displays of mining and milling—an extremely educational feature. Piper's Opera House has had a great deal of work done on it. An auspicious series of chamber music is held each summer through the work of Louise Driggs, great granddaughter of John Piper, builder of the first Piper's Opera House.

Time marches on, but the memories of Virginia City will always be. There never has been a place and time so important to so many....

PHOTOGRAPHS



“Saturday night at the Opera House, we'd sit up in the gallery and see all of the movies.”



“The fire in 1942 really cleaned up the Divide.
It was a very sad affair. So many people lost their homes.”



In the icehouse “thered be a layer of ice and [a] layer of sawdust
and a layer of ice; they’d have enough for 2 years.”



"After they cut 2 crops of ice for the icehouse, we
were allowed to skate" on the Divide Reservoir.

Photographs taken by N.J. Broughton

ORIGINAL INDEX: FOR REFERENCE ONLY

In order to standardize the design of all UNOHP transcripts for the online database, they have been reformatted, a process that was completed in early 2012. This document may therefore differ in appearance and pagination from earlier printed versions. Rather than compile entirely new indexes for each volume, the UNOHP has made each transcript fully searchable electronically. If a previous version of this volume existed, its original index has been appended to this document for reference only. A link to the entire catalog can be found online at <http://oralhistory.unr.edu/>.

B

Beebe, Lucius, 17-18
Brown, James, 4
Brown, Jane Parks, 4

R

Rasner, Jane, 2
Rasner, John, 2
Rasner family (Comstock), 2-3

C

Clegg, Charles, 17-18
Cochran, Mary Williamson, 4
Cochran, Minnie Ellen Brown, 4-5
Cochran, Robert, 3-4
Cochran, William, 4, 5

S

Sports and leisure, 10, 11, 12-15; Bowers Mansion picnics, 13-14; parades, 13; winter sports, 11, 12
Structures (Comstock): disappearance of, 10-11, 16-17; Divide houses, 10-11; fire, 1942, 8-9, 16-17; Fourth Ward School, 17; J. Jones Pharmacy, 3; Maynard building, 3; metal shop, 4; mine office, 7; N. C. Prater grocery, 16; National Guard Hall, 14, 16; Occidental Hotel, 16; Piper house, 18; Piper's Opera House, 14, 19-20; Pioneer Drugstore, 18; "The Way It Was Museum, 19; Wells Fargo building, 16

D

Divide (Comstock), 5; fire, 8-9, 16-17; ice cutting, 11-12

F

Family life, 5, 9-10
Fire, 1942 (Comstock), 8-9, 16-17

M

Mines and mining, occupations: hoist engineer, 5-6, 7-8; machinist, 4; shift boss, 6, 7

Mines and mining, working conditions, 6, 7; ice cutting, 11-12

T

Territorial Enterprise, 17-18
Tourism, 18-20; "Bonanza", 19

W

Westphal, Harry, 1

Y

Nichols, Raymond, 1-2
Noel, George, 3

N

Young, Eliza Ann Rasner, 2-3, 8
Young, Rilla Cochran, 8, 9
Young, Charles Willet, 3, 8; assemblyman, 8; chief of police, 8; hoist engineer, 5, 6, 7-8; shift boss, 6, 7
Young Willet, 3, 5
Young family (Comstock), 1

